

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE GLOBAL NORTH AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH?

by Thomas Hylland Eriksen ([Professor at the University of Oslo's Department of Social Anthropology](#))

As a young schoolboy in the 1970s, I learned that there were two kinds of countries in the world: The industrialized countries and the developing countries. In Norwegian, they were abbreviated as *i-land* and *u-land* (“i-countries and d-countries”). As a slightly older schoolboy, I would discover that there were progressive people who had read up on the latest literature, and who distinguished between the First, the Second and the Third Worlds; the industrialized, Western countries; the Communist bloc; and the poor, underdeveloped or developing countries (make your choice). Some made it more complicated and added the Fourth World, that of stateless indigenous peoples. I had one teacher – this was in Nairobi in the mid-seventies – who even differentiated between the Third, the Fourth and the Fifth Worlds within the general subcategory of the Third: The Third World countries were those that were well on their way to becoming rich and “developed” (I think he mentioned Malaysia and possibly Algeria); the Fourth were those that struggled but had potential (Kenya was, generously, included); and the Fifth World was chanceless and mired in perennial poverty.

The idea that there were three “worlds” originates, in the Anglophone world, with the anthropologist and sociologist Peter Worsley ([The Third World, 1964](#); and [The Three Worlds, 1984](#)). However, the notion of the Third World is older, coined by the demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952, and his reference to *le tiers monde* did not presuppose the existence of a First or Second World. Rather, when speaking of the poor countries and colonies, he explicitly drew a parallel with the third estate, *le tiers état*, at the time of the French revolution; that is, everyone who did not belong to the clergy or the nobility. He spoke of those that had potential – those who would eventually rise and claim their share. Latterly, these terms have become increasingly unfashionable. This definitely has something to do with the collapse of the Communist Bloc almost 25 years ago. But the concepts were at the outset too crude to make sense to a serious social scientist, Sauvy's loose and metaphorical

usage less so than Worsley's attempt to operationalize them. For what was Argentina? Or Turkey? Immanuel Wallerstein's concepts (from [The Modern World System, 1974–78](#)) of center, periphery and semi-periphery seemed to do the job somewhat better, and his model had the additional advantage of indicating dynamic connectedness within the global system.

It makes little sense to speak of three worlds when there is only one game in town. Instead, during the last decade or so, scholars and enlightened commentators increasingly have begun to speak of the Global South and the Global North. I've even used these terms myself sometimes, almost inadvertently, when lecturing about big and general issues, but I have invariably asked myself afterwards, slightly embarrassed, what's so global about them. Why can't we just say the south and the north; or just materially rich and materially poor countries? Or – again – center, semiperiphery and periphery?

Any conceptual investigation of these classifications must inevitably lead to ambivalence. Global diversity is simply such that it cannot meaningfully be subsumed under a few, let alone two, concepts. It is true that at a very general level, the Global North is associated with stable state organization, an economy largely under (state) control and – accordingly – a dominant formal sector. The recipients of foreign aid, needless to say, belong to the Global South. China and – again – Argentina are hard to fit in.

One attempt to produce an objective classification uses the UNDP's Human Development Index to differentiate. In brief, the Global North consists of those 64 countries which have a high HDI (most of which are located north of the 30th northern parallel), while the remaining 133 countries belong to the Global South.

The terms have become fashionable very recently. In [a bibliographic study by a group of German scholars](#), the first recorded use was in 1996. In 2004, the term The Global South appeared in just 19 publications in the humanities and social sciences, but by 2013, the number had grown to 248. The scholars who use it associate it largely with some of the ills of globalization. While the countries of the Global North not only have stable states but also a strong public sector, the Global South is, to a far greater extent, subject to the forces of global

neoliberalism, rather than enacting the very same forces.

Seen from this perspective, the neologisms make sense. The post-Cold War world is not mainly divided into societies that follow different political ideologies such as socialism or liberalism, but by degrees of benefits in a globalized neoliberal capitalist economy. This is why the prefix “Global” may be appropriate, as it signals the integration of the entire planet (well, nearly) into a single economic system – that which Tom Friedman (in-)famously described as “a flat world” (in [The World is Flat, 2005](#)). So far, so good. The Global South and the Global North represent an updated perspective on the post-1991 world, which distinguishes not between political systems or degrees of poverty, but between the victims and the benefactors of global capitalism.

But you then start to wonder how useful such huge blanket terms are at the end of the day. I certainly do as an anthropologist, but also as someone who travels and observes everyday life as I go along. In Albania some years ago, I saw dark blue BMWs and horsecarts side by side. In India, I've seen lush oases of luxury alongside struggling lower-middle class life and plain hopelessness. In Russia, the contrast between glittering St Petersburg (where I'm writing these sentences) and the surrounding countryside is dramatic. In the US, there are inner city areas where life expectancy matches that of some of the poorer African countries. And what to make of a country like Brazil? It is sometimes said that before Lula, half of the population had an obesity problem, while the other half were undernourished. The proportions have shifted somewhat after years of *bolsa familiar* and other progressive policies, but in terms of inequality, Brazil still fares just barely better than South Africa, where the GDP is excellent by African

standards, but so unevenly distributed that you literally move from one “world” to another within minutes if you enter the taxi, say, at the University of Cape Town and get out in the Cape Flats. Same thing in Nairobi. And I haven't even mentioned the Gulf States. Even in my hometown of Oslo, inequality within the city is striking. Notwithstanding Norway's reputation for being equitable and egalitarian, life expectancy between two adjacent boroughs in the city can differ by more than ten years – equal to the gap between Sweden and Morocco!

One main shortcoming of these huge, global classifications is their methodological nationalism. Entire countries, whether they are called Nauru or China – China has 150,000 times as many inhabitants as Nauru – are considered the relevant entities and are thus presumably comparable. But GDP, or HDI for that matter, for a country as a whole reveals precious little about how the poorest 20%, or the poorest 80%, or the richest 1%, live. So, obviously, what is needed are more fine-grained instruments to gauge the quality of life and the economic circumstances of a community, since most of the world's population live mainly in communities and not in states. The result of this kind of endeavor might surprise some, and it would certainly make for a more mottled and colorful map of the world than the drab monochrome surfaces produced by a planet divided into the Global North and Global South.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen has published widely on globalization and he is currently running a research project on three crises of globalization called [Overheating](#). He shares his opinions and observations on his personal blog <http://hyllanderiksen.net>.